

AN ARTICLE ON HELEN KELLER

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SPECTATOR Column from

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THE SPECTATOR

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"I WAS deaf, and I hear; I was blind, and I see; I was dumb, and I speak."

The words were the oratorical climax in one of the most remarkable addresses that an American or any other audience has ever been privileged to hear. They were spoken by Miss Helen Keller in her first address before a New York City audience, in the Forty-eighth Street Theater, on Sunday evening, March 30. Some of the speaker's previous words had not been easily understood by her hearers, though their attention was almost painfully alert to catch every syllable that fell from the speaker's lips; but these words rang out with a clearness that made them understood by the remotest listener. There was an unmistakable note of triumph in them; and the realization of the years of patient struggle that their utterance had cost brought tears to many eyes.



The struggle that ended in these words of triumph had begun a score of years before, when, as a child of six, knowing not a word of any language, blind and deaf, the little girl had taken her first lesson in associating words with things. Her teacher, herself a young girl, who also knew what blindness meant—for until her eighteenth year Miss Sullivan, now Mrs. Macy, had been almost totally blind—had gone to Helen Keller's home in Florida to see whether the little girl's mind could be reached in any way, in spite of the triple bars that kept it from human communication. She had taken with her a doll for the child, sent by other blind children as a present. Helen was allowed to ransack her teacher's trunk, and she found the doll. Her instructor took the child's hand and touched the doll with it, then traced with the little fingers the letters DOLL. Each day a new object was associated with a word in this way; but the progress was slow for nearly a month. Finally, one day, Helen made the great discovery that everything had a name—water, milk, house, ground—and that the symbols that her hand was tracing represented these names. She turned to her teacher and touched *her*, inquiringly. "Teacher," was spelled out in answer. A glad smile of intelligence and recognition overspread the child's features. "And 'teacher' I have remained from that day to this," said Mrs. Macy. On that day of her soul's awakening the little pupil learned

thirty new words. Afterwards her progress was so rapid that at the age of ten she was talking (through the touch language, of course) about—the tariff, if you please!



Her information about the tariff was acquired in this way. She always asked her teacher what her father's guests at dinner were talking about, and on this occasion, in answer to her question, her teacher responded, "It is about something you would not understand." "How do you know I would not understand?" was the instant rejoinder, coupled with a confident statement and an appealing illustration: "I have a good mind! And you know that the Greeks used to allow their children to hear the conversation of those who talked wisely." Nothing could be reserved from an intelligence of such alertness and activity. Thus early Helen Keller began to take an interest in abstract subjects—she was already, as her remark showed, interested in the life of ancient Greece. And in Mrs. Macy's preliminary address on her pupil's education she said, referring to the later years: "Helen made such progress, indeed, that at last the pupil outstripped the teacher. Miss Keller knows far more to-day of Greek, of Latin, of economics, and of philosophy than I do." The account of Miss Keller's unparalleled achievement in taking the examinations at Radcliffe College and winning her degree was one that, in the words of an auditor, "made every one of us, I am sure, feel ashamed of ourselves for our own neglect of our opportunities."



The daintily dressed figure that stepped forward after her teacher's address was one that roused the deepest interest and admiration; a sentiment not unmingled with pity. Looking to be in her early twenties, though her teacher's reminiscences had shown her to be beyond them, Miss Keller impressed one as a person in whom physical and intellectual qualities were extremely well balanced. There was in the fine strong face the evidence of a struggle with fate, but it had left the features with a comely placidity that was near akin to beauty. In the girlish figure and the mobile features there was a rare charm that kept every eye riveted upon the speaker as she stood before her audience with easy bearing, her hands incased in white gloves and in her

arms a beautiful bunch of long-stemmed roses, whose fragrance she occasionally inhaled. After each division of her subject was concluded there was a slight movement, a change of expression, as if some inner electric signal had suddenly started a new train of thought. The voice, at times unutterably pathetic in its deep, round tones, was yet full of strong vowel sounds and carefully uttered consonants that showed the assiduous training of the instructors who had performed this modern miracle not only of making the dumb speak, but of causing one who has never heard the sound of her own voice to enunciate her words, for the most part, distinctly and in tones of the quality and strength suitable for an address that was to be delivered in a public hall. Quoting one of the greatest English authorities on the education of the deaf, Mrs. Macy was fully justified, in the opinion of most of her auditors, in saying that Helen Keller's mastery of speech was the "greatest individual achievement in the history of education."



It was in the answering of questions, however, at the conclusion of the addresses, that the most dramatic incidents of the evening occurred. Miss Keller, removing one of her gloves, placed the fingers of her right hand on her teacher's face—the little finger on the throat, the other fingers on the lips, and the thumb on the side of the nose. In thus interpreting speech, Mrs. Macy explained, her pupil had a slight advantage over the seeing deaf who interpret speech by lip-reading—which, she said, "is to a considerable extent guesswork, for the lip-reader cannot get the guttural sounds or the nasal tones," as Miss Keller can by the touch method. The questions asked by the audience were repeated by the teacher, and almost instantly grasped by her pupil, who answered them, facing the audience, with quick wit and with an engaging smile that fairly lit up her face as a humorous fancy passed through her brain. One question was,

"It is said that you can play on the harp and even on the organ. Is this true?" With her illuminating smile the answer came, "If I can play on an organ, it must be a hand organ." "Is your sense of touch abnormally keen?" was another question. "It is the same as yours, but it has been developed more thoroughly." "How about the sense of taste?" With another laugh came the answer, "I like good things to eat." Some one asked, "Do you practice mental healing?" There was here a moment's confusion between the words "feeling" and "healing," but when "healing" was finally understood the reply came like a flash, "I'm no doctor!" The joy of hearing this part of Miss Keller's talk was that it gave one the sense of listening to a bright, happy, normal girl, who loved her friends, her home, her work in life, and her books. As to her books, one question brought out her interest in current literature. "How long have you been interested in Socialism?" "Since I read H. G. Wells's book, 'New Worlds for Old,' about two years ago," was the answer.



The Spectator began by saying that the climax of Helen Keller's address was in the words cited in the first of these paragraphs. But on reflection he thinks that the real climax of the occasion was when a hearer asked, "Do you know when we applaud?" Pupil and teacher came to the footlights, where there was no floor-covering to interfere with the vibrations, and Miss Keller's face assumed an intent expression while the theater rang with applause for the heroic girl who had struggled to light through darkness and who had voiced a message of love and inspiration to every one present. "Yes, I know you are applauding; *I feel it*," were the words that told that her friends had communicated in return their love and sympathy to the imprisoned soul that had escaped its bonds and was free.



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